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SEED AND SOIL

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At many meetings of teachers called for the purpose of considering the teaching of English, much attention is given to the subject of literature. The interest of speakers and of those who take part in the discussions centers in the question: "What literary work shall we select for this or that age or grade?" One tells us that we should devote a large measure of time, even in the elementary schools, to the study of Shakespeare, of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and to the study of the Greek classics; another, that we would better set aside Shakespeare in favor of Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier; again, one advises us to discard Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier, assuring us that there is little in those authors of value or interest to the child; that the time devoted to their works would be used more advantageously in the reading and study of stories depicting noble deeds and inculcating the belief that, in the long or the short, virtue is rewarded. Is the teacher who presents *Sir Launfal* to his eighth-grade class making an unwise selection? Or is his a most happy choice? Shall we eliminate the *Sir Roger de Coverley Papers* and Burke on *Conciliation* from the high-school curriculum, or shall we continue the teaching of them, content in the feeling of fruitful effort? The dictum of this speaker contrasts sharply with the dictums heard at other conferences. The enthusiastic teacher, passing through his Tennyson, or Dickens, or Bret Harte age, and seeing freedom for himself in the dignified, never-ending "Battle of the Literates" — renewed, fought out along different lines, and quite settled at every meeting — may elect to present to his class his beloved author who may not have appeared on the battlefields. A fortunate class! A teacher so inspired furnishes an open sesame to the heart, to the spirit of the master — the

secret of the divine things that he possesses is more than likely to be betrayed to, and to become a divine heritage of, every child in the class. The teacher who desires to follow the mandates of his superiors, conscientiously, scrupulously, even to the letter, is bewildered, hampered, rendered inefficient.

So many considerations affect the choice of literature for school children as well as for the individual outside of school: the age, training, culture, temperament of the teacher; the spirit of the class, taken collectively and individually; its spiritual needs, particularly of its dominating members; the atmosphere, setting, background of the home and the school—these and many other influences bear on the choice. Differences of opinion as to the best choice of reading-matter are inevitable. One assumes a grave responsibility who says of literature that has held back the heavy bars of Time: "This shall be read, that shall not be read." The good resulting from the reading of worthy literature can never be entirely lost; as we sow, so shall we reap intellectually as morally. But are we not confining our attention too exclusively to the seed itself? Of itself the seed may be perfect, but if the soil is not scientifically, perseveringly, tenderly prepared for its reception, what avails the perfection?

The teacher who directs with wise suggestion the reading of a class of geniuses, of Franklins or Websters, may feel that he has done his full duty: a flash of the inner light illuminates the reader, the echo of a kindred soul is heard, understood, and the truth expressed by the writer is his. But the genius is rare. The thoughtful, earnest, industrious, responsible child is rare. The average class is made up of children who are curious, not inquiring; who are satisfied in the doing of the minimum of work required, fairly well; who are more or less indifferent to their own interests, and who are unwilling to believe that the superfluous labor counts for all that is best in life. Each class has its quota of so-called "bright" pupils, confident, touching ever so lightly the throbbing pulse of some master's offering, and then sweeping breezily on, scintillating with superficiality. For them, verily, is "truth hid in great depths" and "the way to seek it doth not appear," for they are blinded by their own brilliancy.

For several years past the reading-matter put into the hands of the Chicago public-school children from the first to the twelfth grades has been of good quality, notwithstanding that fact, the children are today afflicted with a poverty of language; their expression, oral and written, is inadequate and feeble. The poverty of language is accompanied by poverty of thought. We may fondly imagine that the boy who stands to recite, hesitates, jerks out a word or two, and then gazes into space, does so because he is bursting with ideas which his voice refuses to give out; so we sympathetically help him along, sometimes giving him the idea we think is his, and then helping him express it; we may even more fondly imagine that the girl who runs six sentences together does so because a world of ideas lies bare before her, and she is so intent on the living thoughts that she deigns not to consider capital or period; that the one who, after grandiloquently declaring that Goldsmith's diction in his "Deserted Village" is unsurpassed, marvelous, etc. (she is quite sure—hasn't she memorized the statement from the infallible "Introductory Remarks" ?), and directly afterward characterizes Rome's Nero as an "awful mean king," and sums the character of her teasing playmate as an "awful mean boy"—we may deceive ourselves into thinking that they are expressing ideas; but they are merely saying or writing words. We were disappointed yesterday because the child's attempt to translate into his own diction a passage read and re-read in class was a miserable failure; we are tearful today because child after child, looking helplessly surprised when the stranger formed in his own way the question that we are sure the children could answer, failed in recitation; tomorrow, the office boy, the stenographer, the bookkeeper, drives his employer to despair, and we hear the groan of the business man. Yet for years the young people have consumed a great amount of time reading and re-reading masterly literature.

Are we not calling for expert workmanship before putting into the hands of the apprentice the tools by which he may equip himself for skilful work? Until we realize that English, not an art, not a science, must be presented scientifically to the students,

the reading of the greatest literature will be more or less of a failure, because it will not perform its functions. It will fail to develop in the child the power to discriminate between the worthy and the unworthy; the power to form after examination an opinion of his own concerning a production; the power to understand its relations to other subjects in literature and life; the power to appreciate the record of the best that has been thought and felt by man; lastly, the power of expressing in simple, clear language his own ideas, if he is an originator; if not, to express and apply the ideas of others which he has learned and understands.

We give much time to written exercises in all subjects, believing that the child learns to write correctly by constant practice. True, if the practice is itself of the right kind. It may be wise to cut the time allotted to written work and devote a large part of it to oral exercise. A child benefits himself by written expression only when he writes of that in which he is interested; when he is so full of his subject that the writing is a delight; when his inner joy in the doing permeates and irradiates from every line. Then, as the artist sees to it that his masterpiece is framed and placed to advantage, so will the boy or girl put forth effort to set up in worthy dress the precious offspring of his heart and brain. He will seek the written symbols that express his ideas; he will begin to realize how insignificant is the relationship between the written and spoken signs of the same idea, and how necessary that he equip himself with the tools required in the doing of his work; he will unconsciously work for clearness, force, unity; for he knows so well what he is about that he is not willing to be misunderstood. Not the quantity of the writing, but the quality, the life, the spirit, the light that dominate it.

A ten- or twelve-minute composition, brimful of the writer's interest, thoughtfully written, is of more value to the student than are hours of indifferent, desultory writing on subjects in which he is but half instructed. Even in the matter of punctuation great help may be given by oral work; so great an assistance is the oral element in the presenting of this subject that I believe that, if so helped, by the time the child reaches eighth grade,

punctuation may be handled as a familiar, long-used tool, easily, practically, effectively.

It would be well to eliminate from the spelling lists of all grades dozens of words that are practically never misspelled, and to set aside uncommon words and those outside the child's experience, until he is equipped with the list of about twelve hundred everyday words—the words that all should know, the words that are misspelled from first to twelfth grades. This list should be most carefully selected, discriminating as to the form of the word to be included. To illustrate, "begin" is rarely written incorrectly, "beginning" is commonly misspelled; "speech" and "speaking," "occur" and "occurred," give trouble. There is no reason why a normal child should not be prepared to use this list in writing with as little effort, and as correctly, as he uses them in speech.

If in the teaching of technical grammar in the seventh and eighth grades our purpose is to induce the child to compile a list of grammatical facts to enable him to answer what we call nice questions in grammar, particularly examination questions; or, if we think he will express himself correctly either in speech or writing because of his knowledge of such data, we are blundering. But if we teach him enough of grammatical terminology and classification to enable him to work out the logical relations of the various parts of a sentence or a group of sentences placed before him, that he may thereby interpret more clearly the exact meaning of the writer, provided that we do not trammel him by giving him the work as written exercise, we are serving the student well. We are putting into his hands one of the best possible means of developing his analytical power, without which he cannot understand the exact meaning of many of the ordinary communications of his fellow-men, not to speak of appreciating the great literature.

We conduct our reading lessons nowadays in the cold-blooded, intellectual manner, quite worthy of teachers of overcultured women. Why not allow the child to read Patrick Henry's "Address," Antony's "Oration," "Battle of Balaklava," as he feels them? To be sure, he will shout and rant more or less; to

be sure, our nerves may be more or less racked; but the reader's joy will be exceeded only by that of his childish auditors. He may not know the exact meaning of some of the phrases that he shouts, but the spirit will not be missing—the spirit of Cæsar, or Rienzi, or Clay will go marching bravely on, thrilling speaker and listener. We have exaggerated the evils of this kind of work; we have a generation of youthful cynics who elevate their eyebrows and smile when some daring spirit attempts to read as he loves to. Why not devote considerable time in the middle elementary grades particularly to dramatizations?

Because I have been asked to speak particularly of the work in word-analysis as it is handled by the class now under my charge, I shall do no more than to mention the great value of the study of the thought-connectives of English speech; the wonderful power the student acquires from the careful study of synonyms and antonyms, through which he may reach the very heart of the language—the Anglo-Saxon element; and to that study which I place first, far above every other exercise that appears in the classroom—the intensive, daily study of short literary selections. None but those who have had the joyful experience of watching the tender young soul unfold itself to the light, awakened by the delicate touch of a master-spirit, can possibly realize what this work means to the child, morally as well as intellectually. Of this part of my daily work I speak with deep gratitude and reverence.

In September the class took note of about ten of the more common prefixes and a like number of suffixes. After they had learned the meanings of the prefixes and suffixes, one of the easier stems from the Latin, in the different forms in which it appears in English words, was given to the children. They were instructed in the building of words by the adjusting of stems and prefixes and suffixes. They were impressed with the facts that they could not build haphazard, and that it would be necessary to consult their dictionaries to verify the word and the various forms they desired to offer. At the end of the week the pupils had collected about one hundred and fifty words. The words were then written on the blackboards and carefully inspected by

the entire class, and corrections of many kinds were made. The words were then copied into blank-books, from which they were analyzed and discussed at considerable length during the following week. The words were used in sentences, and care was taken to point out instances of words deviating from their literal meaning. In many cases the children gave reasons as to the changes, occasionally making an excellent point. They quickly acquired the "dictionary habit," and they watched each other so closely that he must needs be a daring child who attempted to guess his way into the work, the work, therefore, tending to make the student accurate as well as observant. A list of from twenty to forty of the more representative words from the stem, including those that were likely to be most useful to them as part of their vocabularies, was then printed on a large cardboard and placed before the class. There are so many words with each stem that it is quite impossible to go over all of them frequently. We have by means of the printed cards, the words for which the students themselves supply, managed to keep in touch with every stem studied during the year. It was necessary to devote more than a week to such stems as "graph" and "logos," so that we have been able to study about twenty stems during the present school year. The stress of the work is laid, not upon the building itself, though the pupils' interest in that phase of the work is quite absorbing, but rather upon the use of the words in sentences, their exact meaning, and their variations of meanings, and upon the comparing and contrasting of words by careful analysis. Each week we added to our lists of prefixes and suffixes, including many Greek prefixes. The children now have a ready, usable knowledge of the prefixes and suffixes of the language, and their vocabularies are greatly enriched. The children themselves realize the value of the work; it is ever a pleasure to them.